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CHELSEA OVERSIGHT PANEL

REPORT ON

THE FIRST YEAR OF IMPLEMENTATION OF THE

CHELSEA SCHOOL COMMITTEE - BOSTON UNIVERSITY AGREEMENT

1989-1990

CHELSEA OVERSIGHT PANEL

Irwin Blumer, Chair
John T. Dunlop
Charles Grigsby
Harold Howe, II
Richard J. Santagati
Miren Uriarte-Gaston

November 20, 1990

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CHELSEA OVERSIGHT PANEL REPORT ON THE FIRST YEAR OF IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CHELSEA SCHOOL COMMITTEE - BOSTON UNIVERSITY AGREEMENT 1989-1990

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is the first report of the Chelsea Oversight Panel, which was appointed by the State Board of Education at the request of the Governor in June 1989. The Panel's mission is to evaluate and report on whether Boston University is conducting the business of the Chelsea Public Schools in an open, cooperative, and publicly accountable manner. The six-member Panel, chaired by Superintendent Irwin Blumer, makes the following findings about the process by which Boston University has begun this experiment in public school governance:

A. Commendations

1. Positive energy and initiative. Boston University's institutional investment in the improvement of the Chelsea Public Schools has moved the city toward increased attention to the public schools, and generally spurred community participation, particularly among those who had few opportunities to participate in school issues before. The energy and creative spirit of the University's Management Team hold great potential for positive change. (Page 4.)

2. Dynamic leadership by the Superintendent. Superintendent Diana Lam, selected by the BU Management Team, has brought a "breath of fresh air" into the school system. Among other significant accomplishments, she has fostered renewed vitality among some staff at all levels, and expanded parent involvement in the schools. (Page 4.)

3. Educational and management initiatives. Superintendent Lam and the BU Management Team deserve commendation for bold educational and management initiatives they have undertaken in the first year. These include: changing the structure of the high school; involving teachers in the process of curriculum improvement; the innovative program at the Shurtleff School; and improved management of school business affairs and school food services. The initiatives begun by BU's School of Social Work in Chelsea are also noteworthy. (Page 4.)

B. Recommendations

1. Governance. The roles and responsibilities of the different groups involved in Chelsea school governance and

management -- especially the BU Management Team, the elected School Committee, the Chelsea Executive Advisory Committee, and the Superintendent -- all need to be clarified and better defined. The current structure of governance and administration is ambiguous, and mixes policymaking and implementation. As a consequence, the Management Team may function in areas that should be the responsibility of the Superintendent; the Superintendent must work with three separate governing or advisory boards as well as an array of other groups; and public access to decision-making becomes more difficult. While the Panel noted at its October 1990 meeting that representatives of the three key boards and the Superintendent believe the working relationship is improving in this second year of implementation, critical questions about roles and responsibilities still remain. (Page 5.)

2. Interaction with the community. Boston University must create an atmosphere of inclusion for community groups and others in school policy decision-making, without running the system by referendum. However successful BU has been during the first year of the project, it has been unsuccessful in convincing several major constituencies that it is sensitive to their input. The fundamental challenge is for BU to create a decision-making environment in which people feel they are valued and productive partners in this project. (Page 6.)

3. Specific goals. Boston University needs to refine its broad educational goals for Chelsea into specific objectives, and identify how it intends to evaluate success in each area. While it takes time to accomplish this process, failure to do so will make it increasingly difficult to measure the success of the project. (Page 7.)

Conclusion

Boston University cannot fulfill its mission in Chelsea without substantially improved relations between the University and various other groups in the city. The "genuine access and involvement by parents, school staff and the public in general," which the Panel is charged to oversee and assess, depends on clear governance and management roles, careful distinction between policy and implementation, and a respectful and cooperative partnership among the parties with a stake in the Chelsea Public Schools.

A broader issue is whether the articulated educational goals of the project can be achieved, even over a decade, without substantially increased funding and economic development to provide a solid tax base for the school system. Perhaps a way to heal some of the divisions that exist between the University, the leadership of the city, and other groups in Chelsea is for all to make common cause around a broader strategy to address the problems of economic development and adequate funding for public education. (Page 7.)

CHELSEA OVERSIGHT PANEL REPORT ON THE FIRST YEAR OF IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CHELSEA SCHOOL COMMITTEE - BOSTON UNIVERSITY AGREEMENT 1989-1990

I. INTRODUCTION

A. PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

This is the first report of the Chelsea Oversight Panel, which was appointed by the State Board of Education at the request of the Governor in June 1989. The Panel, chaired by Newton School Superintendent (and former Chelsea resident) Irwin Blumer, met five times during the 1989-90 school year, including four sessions in Chelsea, to monitor and discuss the first year of implementation of the agreement between the Chelsea School Committee and Boston University. The Panel is responsible for observing and commenting on the relationships that are involved as the Boston University/Chelsea project moves forward, with particular attention to the openness of decision-making and the availability of information to the public.

The Panel's mission, as defined by the State Board of Education on June 27, 1989 and affirmed by the Panel on September 28, 1989, is:

> . . . to evaluate and report on whether Boston University is conducting the business of the Chelsea Public Schools in a publicly accountable way that assures genuine access and involvement by parents, school staff and the public in general. The Panel will examine the extent to which Boston University is working together with the people of Chelsea to assure that the project meets educational goals, although it is not the Panel's role to assess the merits of the educational decisions Boston University makes, to act as an appellate board, or to evaluate whether the stated educational goals have been met.

In keeping with the Panel's mission statement, this report presents the Panel's assessment of the process by which Boston University has begun this experiment in public school governance -- with a particular focus on whether BU is maintaining its commitment to run the school system in an open, cooperative and publicly accountable manner.

B. CHRONOLOGY

In March 1989 the Chelsea School Committee voted to endorse an agreement with Boston University, under which the elected School Committee would turn over to BU its authority over the Chelsea Public Schools. Under the agreement, the School Committee retained the right to request that BU reconsider certain decisions, as well as the right to remove BU altogether by a majority vote of the School Committee. The Chelsea Board of Aldermen voted in April 1989 to submit to the Legislature a home rule petition seeking the necessary enabling legislation for this unprecedented agreement. In June 1989 the Governor signed into law Chapter 133 of the Acts of 1989, authorizing the Chelsea School Committee to enter into an agreement with BU to run the city's school system for up to ten years.

In signing the bill, which contains several exemptions from the laws that govern all other school committees in the Commonwealth, the Governor requested that the State Board of Education appoint a special blue-ribbon Chelsea Oversight Panel to monitor and report periodically on implementation of the agreement. The Governor requested that the Panel consist of people "who are knowledgeable about the process of educational change, sympathetic to the goals of the project, and familiar with the needs of urban schools and communities." In response to this request and upon recommendation of the Commissioner of Education, the State Board appointed seven members to the Chelsea Oversight Panel:

1. Superintendent Irwin Blumer, Chair
2. Professor John T. Dunlop
3. Mr. Charles Grigsby
4. Professor Harold Howe II
5. Superintendent Diana Lam (who resigned from the Panel in September 1989 after her appointment as Superintendent of Schools in Chelsea)
6. Mr. Richard J. Santagati
7. Professor Miren Uriarte-Gaston

Both the State Board and the Panel anticipated that the Governor would provide funding for a part-time Department of Education staff member to work as the Panel's "eyes and ears" in Chelsea, attending meetings of the various groups involved in the Chelsea Public Schools. Despite the efforts of the State Board, the Commissioner and the Panel, the Governor's office did not provide the funding. Although senior managers from the Department have provided assistance to the Panel, the lack of a part-time staff person assigned solely to this role has severely limited the Panel's ability to fulfill its mission.

Nevertheless, the four open forums the Panel conducted in Chelsea in September and December of 1989 and March and June of 1990 produced considerable information about, and insight into,

the way in which BU and the other parties were proceeding to implement this project. This was supplemented by school visits conducted by individual Panel members during the course of the year. Consequently, although the Panel's activities are different than they might have been with a staff person, the Panel believes its oversight role is vital, and remains committed to its task.

C. MAJOR GROUPS IN CHELSEA SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

Any urban school system is a complicated organization. The Boston University/Chelsea Project is more complicated than most, because of the varied groups and individuals playing a formal or informal role in the governance and management of the school system. Four key actors are:

1. the Boston University Management Team, the group designated by Boston University to function as the school committee for governance of the Chelsea Public Schools. It is chaired by Dean Peter R. Greer of the BU School of Education.

2. the Chelsea School Committee, chaired by Anthony Tiro. It consists of six members elected by the voters of Chelsea, and the Mayor, who serves ex officio. Under Chapter 133 of the Acts of 1989, the School Committee voted to cede its school governance authority to Boston University. However, the School Committee continues to meet as a governmental body, and has authority to compel BU to reconsider certain decisions, and to terminate the agreement with BU by majority vote.

3. the Chelsea Executive Advisory Committee, established by Boston University under the terms of its agreement with the Chelsea School Committee. It is chaired by Attorney Gwendolyn Tyre of Chelsea, and consists of fifteen members representing various school and community groups in Chelsea.

4. Chelsea Superintendent of Schools Diana Lam, appointed by the BU Management Team in August 1989. She reports to and is evaluated by the BU Management Team, but otherwise has all the powers and duties of any superintendent of schools in Massachusetts.

Many other groups are concerned about and involved in Chelsea Public Schools issues. They include the Chelsea Teachers' Association, the Administrators' Association, the Parent Advisory Councils for Special Education and Bilingual Education, the Commission on Hispanic Affairs, the Chamber of Commerce, the Human Services Collaborative, and the Chelsea Coalition for Quality Education.

II. FINDINGS

A. COMMENDATIONS

1. Positive energy and initiative. Overall, Boston University's presence in Chelsea, and its institutional investment in the improvement of the public schools, has opened up the system in a way that was not possible before. It has shone a spotlight on Chelsea, moved the city toward increased attention to the public schools, and generally spurred community participation, particularly among those who had few opportunities to participate in school issues before.

The University, through the Management Team and its other resources, has wasted no time involving itself in Chelsea with energy and resolve. This energy and creative spirit holds great potential for positive change.

2. Dynamic leadership by the Superintendent. The Boston University Management Team deserves credit for its wisdom in selecting Diana Lam as Superintendent of Schools. She has brought a "breath of fresh air" into the school system. There appears to be renewed vitality among some staff at all levels, and a real commitment to change and to staff owning that change. She has also been successful in opening up the schools to parents. Indeed, although the Panel has heard concerns that parents and others feel excluded at times from decision-making in the Boston University project, no one has complained about the lack of direct involvement with the schools.

3. Educational and management initiatives. While the Panel does not evaluate Boston University's achievement of its educational goals, Superintendent Lam and the school staff, and the Boston University Management Team, deserve commendation for bold educational and management initiatives they have undertaken in this first year. These include: changing the structure of the high school in a thoughtful and yet radical way in a short period of time; mini-grants, writing projects, and other initiatives by the Superintendent that engage and empower teachers in the process of positive change and curriculum improvement; the innovative program at the Shurtleff School; and improved management of school business affairs and school food services. The effort by Boston University to involve all segments of the University in the Chelsea project, particularly the initiatives undertaken by the School of Social Work, are commendable. However, at this early stage of an anticipated ten-year project, many ideas originally proposed by BU, which would lead to "community schools" that in the broadest sense serve all residents from birth through adulthood, have yet to be implemented.

B. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Governance. The roles and responsibilities of the different groups involved in Chelsea school governance and management -- in particular, the Boston University Management Team, the School Committee, the Chelsea Executive Advisory Committee, and the Superintendent -- all need to be clarified and better defined. The current structure of governance and administration is ambiguous, and mixes policymaking and implementation. The ambiguity is counter-productive, and causes misunderstanding and confusion about public accountability and access to decision-making.

The very fact that the Boston University group is called the "Management Team" contributes to this problem. Ideally, the University Team could function as a board of directors, establishing policy and hiring a chief executive (the Superintendent of Schools) to manage the operations of the system. The Management Team, however, blurs the distinction between policy and implementation issues. One consequence is that the Team may function needlessly as a "Board of Superintendents," participating in management and implementation decisions that should be the responsibility of the Superintendent. Moreover, if the Management Team merges the discussion of policy and implementation issues without distinction, it is more difficult for the public to understand the points at which it may have genuine access to the decision-making process.

One illustration is the Management Team's approach to the policy question of bilingual education at the pre-school level, an issue of concern to the Latino community in Chelsea. The Panel takes no position on the educational merits of one approach or another, since the decision is the University's prerogative. However, the Panel believes the process for deciding such a matter of policy must be well-defined, and provide a clear structure for community involvement. While Superintendent Lam has initiated creative programs to encourage parent and community participation in program development and implementation, the process for public involvement in policymaking by the Management Team is less clear and consequently, a source of concern.

Similarly, the continuing role of the elected School Committee should be better defined. This project began because the elected School Committee chose to transfer authority to Boston University. Having entered into the agreement, the School Committee should help make it work effectively, unless and until the Committee decides to exercise its right to terminate the relationship. By the same token, the University should begin to help the School Committee build its own capacity to govern the school system effectively. The Panel views the recent movement toward unified meetings of the School Committee and the Management Team as a positive step.

The Chelsea Executive Advisory Committee was established by Boston University to give voice to representatives of the varied community and school groups with a stake in this project. The Panel has observed continuing tension over the role of the Committee on issues of policy and implementation. If the Advisory Committee is to function as a meaningful participant in this process, its role must be clearly defined and understood.

Superintendent Lam has the unenviable task of having to deal with three separate "governing" or "advisory" boards, as well as with the array of other groups (unions and professional associations, parent organizations, civic groups) and individuals with whom any superintendent must maintain productive relationships. She is likely to sustain effective leadership of the school system only if the roles of the various groups are clarified.

The Panel recognizes that the Boston University/Chelsea Project is an experiment in school governance and school improvement. Change takes time, and it would be a mistake to judge success at the end of the first or second year of a ten-year project. Indeed, the Panel noted with interest that at its October 9, 1990 meeting, representatives of the three key boards and the Superintendent all commented that steps have been taken to improve communication and the working relationship among the parties in this second year of implementation.

However, if the Project is to succeed, everyone involved in it, including community members, the Management Team, the elected School Committee, and the Executive Advisory Committee, must have a common answer to some fundamental questions: Who establishes policy for the Chelsea Public Schools? Who manages the operations of the Chelsea Public Schools? Are policies established in meetings of the Management Team or in some other forum? Does the Executive Advisory Committee advise on policy, on implementation, or both? How do the Management Team, the School Committee and the Executive Advisory Committee relate to each other and to the Superintendent? What procedures are to be followed to resolve these questions? At present, the Panel concludes that the parties do not have a common view of these issues.

2. Interaction with the community. Boston University must create an atmosphere of inclusion for community groups and others in school policy decision-making, without running the system by referendum. However successful the University has been during the first year of this project, it has been unsuccessful in convincing several major constituencies that it is sensitive to their input.

Some residents of Chelsea may be unwilling to accept that the University ultimately has the authority to make decisions. Nevertheless, the University seems to have underestimated the need for continuous socialization of important

issues with various constituencies. Many decisions that caused consternation in the community might have been more broadly supported if greater efforts had been made at the initial stages to involve these constituencies in policy discussions.

The University has not yet overcome the negative feeling that exists toward it in some segments of the Chelsea community, part of which stems from abrasions that developed even before the project started. Despite significant, useful initiatives and considerable effort to enhance community participation in decision-making to a level beyond that which existed with the School Committee in the past, there is not yet the mutual trust and respect needed for long-term success.

The Panel acknowledges that some strife and conflict are inevitable given the kind of change needed in Chelsea, and the unique nature of the BU/Chelsea Project. Clarifying the roles and responsibilities of the various groups in this complicated organizational structure will help. In addition, the University has raised a valid concern that too much involvement in decision-making can be counter-productive and even paralyzing to a school system. However, the Panel has observed that often the manner in which this concern is conveyed is arrogant and particularly devaluing to parents and others who are members of minority groups.

The fundamental challenge is to create a decision-making environment in which people feel they are valued and productive partners in this project, even though decisions ultimately are the prerogative of the Team. All of the organizations in Chelsea, as well as the University's leadership, are responsible for creating that trust, but because it has sought and accepted the leadership role, the University's responsibility for it is greater.

3. Specific goals. Boston University needs to refine its broad educational goals for Chelsea into specific objectives, and identify how it intends to evaluate success in each area. While it takes time to accomplish this process, failure to do so will make it increasingly difficult to measure the success of the project.

III. CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF CHELSEA

Boston University cannot fulfill its mission in Chelsea without substantially improved relations between the University and various other groups in the city. The "genuine access and involvement by parents, school staff and the public in general," which the Panel is charged to oversee and assess, depends on clear governance and management roles, careful distinction between policy and implementation, and a respectful and cooperative partnership among the various parties with a stake in the Chelsea Public Schools.

A broader issue is whether the articulated educational goals of the project can be achieved, even over a decade, without substantially increased funding and economic development to provide a solid tax base for the school system. This project began with the assumption that thoughtful and well-informed leadership from a major university could raise additional private funds, combine them with the existing flow of public funds, and use the total strategically to meet the educational needs of Chelsea. It is now clear that this assumption about funding was unduly optimistic. Even with a robust state economy and generous private philanthropy, the resources would be inadequate to address the multiple and complex needs of students in Chelsea.

Moreover, reform of the school system is only one part of the solution for a city such as Chelsea. Strong families and good community services are vital elements in a child's education, and it is difficult for families and communities to do their jobs adequately for the children in the midst of the pressures created by poverty. Schools can do better than they do now to help children overcome the handicaps of poverty. However, they cannot guarantee a high rate of success unless they are supported by major efforts to address the effects of poverty in the family and community.

To their credit, the planners of the Boston University/Chelsea project to some extent thought about Chelsea in these terms. The University has launched some programs to address the needs of families, such as the intergenerational literacy project, and has stressed the need to view education from a pre-natal to adult education perspective. But if Chelsea's leaders are ever to meet the needs of the city's children, they must search for solutions that include but go beyond the realm of "education" narrowly conceived.

For example, Chelsea's leaders, in partnership with community groups and Boston University, could survey employment opportunities and labor supply in the city, and seek from the corporate world new investments in the community with employment potential. The pending school finance challenge (Murdoch v. Dukakis), or initiatives by local and state education leaders to provide adequate funding for schools in Chelsea and other poor communities is another avenue -- although Chelsea probably would have to increase its property tax effort to present a convincing case. A third possibility would be to muster the political support in Chelsea to pass an override to Proposition 2½, thereby bringing new local tax funds into the schools.

The bottom line is that the reach of the BU/Chelsea project is not wide enough to do the job Boston University has undertaken. Perhaps a way to heal some of the divisions that currently exist between the University, the leadership of the city, and other groups in Chelsea with a stake in the public schools, is for all to make common cause around a broader strategy to address the problems of economic development and adequate funding for public education.